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THE VALUE OF THE CLASSICS TO STUDENTS OF ENGLISH¹

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The case for the classics does not rest upon their value to the student of English. That is not the chief reason why they are and of right ought to be studied; but it is one reason and a good reason. There are times both in war and in grammar when it is sound strategy to bring forward the auxiliaries and to put the subordinate in a principal position. The present seems to be an opportune time for an evolution of this kind. For English is now the central study of all public high schools. It is in esteem even in vocational institutions of so uncompromising a type that the word Acropolis, if pronounced distinctly within their walls, would sound like the name of a patent fertilizer. It is honored in the commercial high schools, both as a substitute for subjects that the youth of the land have found very troublesome and as the last mark of devotion to idealism and patriotism. Your business friend who never notifies but always "advises" you that your goods have arrived is "strong for English," by which he means spelling and idiom that suit his own predilections and conform to the conventions of the trade. Indeed, all of Germany and nearly all of the United States are in favor of the study of English, though the reasons for this partiality are (as the catalogue of an enterprising engineering school once described its own courses) "very various." If then it can be shown that some knowledge of the classics is needed by the student of English the case for the classics is strengthened for everybody. In presenting this need I imagine myself addressing, not a body of learned classical professors and teachers, but a group of those whom Dr. Blimber was accustomed to call "My young friends"—students doubtful about beginning or continuing classical studies, but ambitious to gain a mastery over English.

¹Read at the ninth annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South.

What we all desire as a result of English study is fluency and accuracy in our own speech and real understanding and appreciation when we read the speech of others. Among ambitious youth the first object of desire is the increase of available vocabulary. Here the facts are reassuring and the opportunities unlimited. There are three great funds of words in the English vocabulary. There is a fund of native English words, a fund of Romance words which have come to us from Latin through the French, and a very large fund which we have derived directly from the Latin and Greek. The last two funds are now really one huge and ever-increasing word-hoard, though it is still useful to remind ourselves that we have three words for every idea that we wish to express—three at least, and often more than three. With these three funds to draw upon—the native fund, the Romance fund, the classical fund—the student of English is poverty-stricken if he must forever *guess* and remains ignorant of his capacity to *surmise* or *conjecture*. He is *tiresome*, *boresome*, *fatiguing*, *exhausting*, *debilitating* if a *freak* is always a *freak* to him and never a *caprice*, a *vagary*, or an *eccentricity*. He lacks experience if he has seen a *ghost* and never an *apparition* or a *specter*. He is not even much of a *trickster* if he knows only *craft* and has neither *deceit*, *subtlety*, nor *artifice*. What satisfaction is there for his feelings in calling some *dolt* a *stupid* and stopping there? Isn't the fool also *dull* and *obtuse*, and probably *thick-skinned*, *callous*, and *indurated* into the bargain? To pass from vituperation to its opposite, the Book of Common Prayer abounds in such duplicates as *times* and *occasions*, *pray* and *beseech*, *changes* and *alterations*, *acknowledge* and *confess*, *adorned* and *beautified*, *assemble* and *meet together*, *weighty* and *important*, *remission* and *forgiveness*, *sins* and *transgressions*, *requisite* and *necessary*, *pardon* and *forgive*, *dissemble* and *cloak*, *image* and *similitude*, *loving* and *amiable*, *enterprized* and *taken in hand*. What would Bryant have done with his beautiful "Fringed Gentian" if he had had but the one word "blue" to describe its color? or even but the two words, *blue* and *azure*? We can see his dire need of a three- or four-syllable word in the lines—

Then doth thy mild and quiet eye
Look through its fringes to the sky—
Blue, blue as if that sky let fall
A flower from its *cerulean* wall.

The practical needs of the poet are not to be overlooked in this materialistic age. Now if this twofold and threefold characteristic of our vocabulary were not well-nigh universal it would deserve but passing remark. But it is the big fact about English, the fact that especially concerns the man who calls himself practical and who seeks fluency and accuracy from his study of language. His rightful heritage is three or more words for every idea. Does he command them? Do they come when he needs them? Is he satisfied with the one word for *building* or *house*, or does he know also dwelling, shelter, domicile, habitation, residence, edifice, structure, fastness, stronghold, palace, cottage, hall, hovel, shelter, mansion, manor, castle, hut, fortress, construction, fortification, retreat, sanctuary—as he has need and occasion to use any one of these? These, whether of native or classical origin, are now indiscriminately English words. But practical young America will say, “Why should I be at the labor of studying Latin in order to add them to my usable vocabulary? Why not go straight to the dictionary or to a book of synonyms? Why not make lists and memorize them?” One reason is that they will not stay memorized, if accumulated in any such wholesale or mechanical fashion. The dictionary will not tell you what you need to know unless you have enough Latin (1) to get the value of suffixes and prefixes, (2) to get the root-meaning, and (3) the training to discern the original image back of the root-meaning. These things are possible only as one acquires one’s words to meet a real and immediate need of expressing ideas. Chiefly they are the result of painstaking translation.

A second reason is that what I have said above, about three words for every idea, is not strictly true. No matter how similar in meaning words may be, there is always a difference in their possible applications, a difference due to tone, spirit, temper, to the influence of associated words, or to arbitrary usage. The choice of words thus becomes a matter of telling or not telling the truth. Expertness in phrase-making and in the use of prepositions depends upon a true perception of root-images. Burke’s expression of a common idea, “In this *posture* things *stood*,” reveals his sense for true association of images. Untrained by his Latin he would doubtless have said: “Things were about like that.” No one ever

achieves perfection in this difficult business; the deplorable fact is that so many young people never begin it at all. Even a little Latin or Greek is valuable here. At least it will enable one to detect the broader distinctions—to reach certainty about memoranda, propaganda, and formulae, for instance—and it may induce good habit. At any rate, no vocational guide that I ever set eyes on is wise enough to tell any young American at the beginning of his high-school course that this part of his education may safely be neglected. Even an instructor of the deaf and dumb in mat-weaving must needs make an occasional distinction. And is it not true that the men of a half-century ago who spoke with such power against the classical training of their day were able to make the distinctions by which they carried their cause to victory mainly because they had enjoyed the benefits of that same classical training? Compare their utterances with those of the later breed of Philistines, and the difference is as great as that noted by Mark Twain between lightning and the lightning bug.

The student of accuracy in English needs Latin or Greek in order that he may master the Grammar of English. I am well aware that teachers of elementary Latin would like it if their pupils came to Latin fully competent in English grammar. The wish is vain. Only by comparison in kind can grammatical concepts be firmly fixed. A second language with which to compare the English procedure is a necessity if the English grammar is to be mastered. Thousands of people have testified to the fact that not until they studied a second language did English grammar become clear to them. And the second language should by all means be Latin, partly because of the completeness of its grammatical apparatus, but chiefly because the native English sentence was first made orderly, logical, serviceable, and efficient under the influence of the grammar of Latin. It was the destruction of the previous Latin civilization in England by the Danish invasions of the ninth century that suggested to Alfred the need of translations by the few priestly scholars still remaining who could render their services in English, or translate an epistle into the vernacular. "God Almighty be thanked," wrote the pious king, as he thought of the ignorance of his clergy, "that we have now *any* teachers in

office." Translations followed during the next century, with the result that is usual when thought is transferred from a language that is equipped with a mature and logical syntax to a language still crude and primitive. The English sentence acquired something like a standard of grammatical and logical competency; not that Latin idiom was bodily transferred, but that English idiom became self-conscious and capable of self-improvement. The English of the average youth of today needs precisely that discipline. One of the chief benefits of the study of the Latin grammar and the practice of Latin composition is that the Latin syntax compels logical statement. The Latin sentence represses waywardness and teaches many lessons of method and order that are not easily or economically learned by practice in English alone. The English does not compel a boy to stop and think what he is about. He does not see the need of it. The English grammar is to him a superfluity and an impudent interference with the rights of man. He readily concedes, however, that it is necessary to attend to grammatical detail when he is trying to master another tongue. If that other tongue be Latin or Greek it gradually equips him with grammatical concepts that serve him equally well in practicing his own speech. The management of clauses, for instance, of tense, sequence, of indirect discourse, of linking apparatus, of position and preposition—so troublesome in writing English, is learned through Latin as a matter of necessity; it is seldom learned thoroughly through English alone, as any journalist can testify or illustrate. The right attitude toward questions of English grammar is achieved only when there is possibility of constant comparison and contrast. It is not pertinent to my purpose here to bring forward the well-known fact that historically the Latinists in certain periods of English literature have not proved a salutary influence upon the English sentence. It is sufficient to note that the things complained of—involved clauses, and over-burdened sentences—are favorite faults of speech with those who have shunned Latin for fear of spoiling their English style.

All that I have said has been on the purely practical level and addressed to the very youthful student, who in most cases is as yet no student at all. And all of it applies equally well to reading, to getting even familiar present-day thought from the printed page.

But the elementary student has needs beyond familiar and present-day thought. He cannot read with pleasure and freedom even the carefully selected English classics that are set for him in the secondary schools unless through his Latin he has gotten an initiation into Roman and Greek ideas. Up to this very century English literature has been produced by people who were trained in classical ideas, or who, not being so trained, at least lived their lives in a society familiar with these. The student of English if devoid of Latin and Greek must pick and choose his reading with great care if he would maintain his interest for long. Unless he confine himself to the *Saturday Evening Post* and the journal of his trade he will many times feel himself a stranger where the reader with even little Latin and less Greek will feel at home. He will find whole periods of English prose impossible and much of English verse beyond his imaginative reach. He must confine himself to the contemporaneous, and often suffer the feeling of detachment even there. He is debarred from real intellectual sympathy with no inconsiderable portion of nineteenth-century prose and verse—to mention only the more familiar names, with portions of Longfellow, Lowell, and Emerson, the Arnolds, the Brownings, the Morris', Landor, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Macaulay, Newman, George Eliot, Ruskin, Rossetti, Pater, and even Tom Moore. Of course this catalogue would grow very rapidly if he tried to extend his reading backward into the eighteenth, seventeenth, and sixteenth centuries. No fewer than one hundred and twenty-five English poets and prose writers, including most of the great names, require mention in such books as Gayley's *Classic Myths in English Literature*. It is not the large number of direct allusions to the classics, however, that makes the trouble. The difficulty lies deeper. One may work assiduously with reference books and may find in them many useful facts. But when the proper names are missing and phrases are encountered that lie one or two removes from plain statement, enjoyment must cease for the student who has no part in that literary inheritance which classical culture has bequeathed. To such a one, even Lowell's prose will be full of mysterious subtleties and dark hints that are untraceable, and consequently offensive to the ignorant. Anybody

may learn a textbook statement about John Milton's English prose and have it ready for examination; but like most things learned for examination it may as well be forgotten the next day by those who cannot read Milton's English prose itself and get meaning out of it. The textbook of English literary history must be taken on faith by one who cannot verify even the statements which hurl themselves at him in the coarse print, to say nothing of the fine print and the footnotes. What real perception of the truth about the nature of the influences that are vaguely called classical and pseudo-classical can the Latinless student acquire? Yet these influences have been always present and at times they have dominated whole periods. The fact is that historical criticism may as well be abandoned by the student of English who can have no first-hand contact with the Latin writers that are said to have influenced English writers. Critical terms are baneful things when employed inaccurately. As for the scholar's work in tracing the origins of literary forms and species, that is of course out of the question. Even the casual reader of English literary history comes not infrequently upon the names of Cicero, Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Terence, Plautus, Homer, and Theocritus—and little good it does him. Without a minimum (which I dare not specify) of reading in Latin and Greek, not much reliance can be placed upon the use of translations by the English student, if trustworthy conclusions are expected. Imaginative sympathy will accomplish wonders, but imaginative sympathy must have at least a slight foundation on which to build.

Aesthetic criticism is not a permanent refuge. No wonder that aesthetic criticism has gradually degenerated into mere personal opinion. The only possible step left is that already taken by some—to break utterly with the past, even with the very recent past, and to renounce and denounce all English writers whom we find not agreeable to our modernism. The penalty that we shall pay for all this is already visible in the shallowness and whimsicality of much of our English instruction. The future of real English study is bound up with that of the other languages and especially Latin and Greek. The real issue is not between ancient and modern languages, nor between English and other modern languages. It

is between serious language-study and no worthy language-study at all—not even in English. When that issue is plainly discerned the reaction may be expected. Meanwhile the preservation of standards in the English work itself imposes upon English teachers everywhere the duty of promoting classical studies as a matter of self-interest.

LATIN CREDITS OFFERED FOR ADMISSION
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

	4 Units	3 Units	2 Units	Offer Latin	Total Students	Percentage
<i>College of Arts, Philosophy, and Science</i>						
1910.....	147	30	42	219	242	90
1911.....	169	25	73	267	296	90
1912.....	152	43	70	265	294	90
1913.....	183	28	78	289	325	89
<i>College of Engineering</i>						
1910.....	94	28	74	196	267	73+
1911.....	104	49	68	221	291	76
1912.....	100	32	92	224	284	78+
1913.....	115	35	104	254	344	74
<i>Home Economics Course</i>						
1911.....	50	9	15	74	79	94
1912.....	61	11	16	88	100	88
1913.....	57	6	30	93	107	87
<i>College of Agriculture (two units required)</i>						
1910.....	37	38	64	139	168	83
1911.....	72	37	85	194	248	78
1912.....	67	41	93	201	262	77
1913.....	88	44	84	216	304	71